



88: Private Time by cali-chan

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The sound of the front door being unlocked reverberated through the empty house, and a second later, two dark-haired heads wearing identical terrified expressions popped up from behind the edge of Eleven's bed.

"Do you think it's your dad?" Mike whispered, still half on top of his girlfriend, but his eyes were fixed on the door of El's room, which was open about a quarter of the way. (A quarter of the way open was still *open* and it totally still counted toward the rules.)

"El?" came the deep voice from somewhere near the foyer. "You guys back already?"

Mike and El's frantic gazes met. "Yes. It's definitely my dad," El responded in a similar harsh whisper, although it was completely unnecessary, as Mike could recognize Hopper's voice just as easily. Her brown eyes were wide and reflected an internal panic Mike was very much feeling as well.

"*Shit*," he let out, and then without any kind of a signal, they both started scrambling to get up at the same time. It turned out to be about as difficult as expected (Mike cursed his genes and the fact that he was all arms and legs and very little coordination), and he ended up tripping on the rug and stumbling halfway across the room. When he managed to steady himself, and realizing that he couldn't exactly

escape out the window because his car was parked outside where Hopper would definitely have seen it already, he turned toward her again. "Door!" he urged.

She got his meaning straight away, and with a flick of her head the door of her room was swinging closed on its own. "Shirt!" she urged back similarly, picking his white t-shirt up off the floor and throwing it to him. He hastily put it on as she kicked her discarded bra under the bed.

As he tried to arrange his hair into some semblance of normalcy, he saw her look frantically around the room as if searching for something before lunging for the nearest outerwear she could find—an old navy-blue hoodie of his that she'd kept when it didn't fit him anymore, which was hanging off the backrest of her desk chair— and putting it on, making sure to zip it all the way up, probably to cover any hickies or to add an extra layer of cover on top of her button-down shirt, to disguise her obvious lack of upper body undergarments. Or maybe both. Whatever the reason was, his girlfriend was a genius and his stupid old hoodie might just save his life.

One last cursory glance down at himself reassured him that he looked... presentable (in the sense that the sudden appearance of his girlfriend's father was more effective in killing the mood than dumping a bucket of ice water over his head), and he moved onto helping El fix up anything around the room that might be out of place. Thankfully the bed was still made, though he couldn't help the blush that rose up his neck when the thought crossed his mind that the bed was only still made because they'd been so... involved... that they hadn't even gotten that far before needing to be horizontal.

El ran a hand through her curls, trying to untangle them somewhat, and together they plucked up their courage to walk out of the room. "Let me do the talking, okay?" she suggested, and Mike nodded, not even bothering to protest. They both knew he had a tendency to babble even in the best of situations, and that would not help one bit in this particular one.

She opened the door and they walked out, soon enough coming across Hopper, who was in the kitchen, browsing the contents of the

fridge. "Hey, Dad," El greeted him with a sweet smile. "You're back early."

"Yeah," he said before turning to the two of them. He stared at them for just long enough that Mike couldn't help thinking *Crap, he knows. We're done for*, but then he pulled out a beer and continued speaking as if nothing was wrong. "You kids find whatever it was you were supposed to go buy?" he asked in his usual rough tone as he popped the can open.

"Max's birthday present," El clarified and, *right*, that's what they were supposed to be doing that day. Max's birthday was coming up the next week, and Mike had stopped by after breakfast to pick El up so they could go downtown and get her a present. El had already marked down some ideas in a bunch of catalogs so they knew more or less what to look for, but when he got to the Hoppers', he found her searching all over her room for them.

Mike helped her look for a while like any good boyfriend would, but after it became painfully obvious that the catalogs were not in her room (they must've fallen from her backpack at some point, he figured), he kind of gave up, sitting down on the floor with his back against the side of her bed, watching her as she searched her clothes drawers.

She gave up, too, when she ran out of drawers to search in, and finally came to sit beside him with a disappointed huff. She was annoyed that she'd spent so much time looking for and through those catalogs and then lost them. He really couldn't remember what he'd said to try and make her feel better, but it must've been good, because all of a sudden she was kissing him enthusiastically.

As it happened too often with the two of them lately, things escalated pretty quickly, and next thing he knew, they were lying down right there on the floor, on top of her ridiculously 70s bright purple shaggy rug she absolutely adored even though he always made fun of it. Now he had to begrudgingly admit the silly rug was actually pretty comfortable, not that he'd been thinking about *that* while they were in the moment. No, at that point the only things his mind could focus on were soft lips, warm skin and *her*...

...which was *really* not something he should be thinking about with her father right in front of them, looking like he could read their minds with one glance.

"Should you be drinking beer right now?" El commented as Hopper sat down at the table. "It's early afternoon." She pulled her hair into a ponytail with a scrunchie she carried around her wrist and put her hands on her hips, giving the can in Hopper's hand a pointed look.

The older man's direct response was a grunt that could mean "you got a point there" just as much as it could mean "you're not the boss of me, kid." Probably the latter, since he raised the can to his lips right after to take another swig. "So, did you get the present?" he asked, going back to the original topic.

"Mm-hmm," was El's reply, just as non-committal, and in any other circumstance Mike might've laughed at how similar those two were, even if they were not actually related by blood.

"So, what'd you get her?" Hopper asked, leaning back in his chair and fixing the two of them with a curious stare.

"Oh, just some accessories for her skateboard," El said with a shrug, and while it wasn't coming out of nowhere— that *was* what she'd been looking for in the catalogs— the way she said it so casually and convincingly caught Mike off guard.

"Like what?" Hopper threw back, taking another sip of his beer, looking and sounding perfectly casual, but there was a voice in the back of Mike's mind that sounded an awful lot like Admiral Ackbar warning him that they were walking right into a trap.

"Just stuff. It's hard to explain if you don't know anything about skateboards," El dodged the question with impressive ease. "Why are you so curious about it? You've never cared about this kind of thing before," she asked with a slight frown.

"What, I can't take an interest in what my daughter's been doing all morning?" Hopper retorted with a scoff, and it was meant to sound amused, Mike knew, but to his ears it sounded rather accusatory, and he was pretty sure now that at some point the conversation had taken

a turn he hadn't noticed before. And he had no idea what to do about it other than stand there like an idiot, looking between the two of them like they were volleying back and forth in a particularly tense tennis match. "I just wasn't expecting you two to be back until much later, is all."

"We got in just a few minutes before you did," El threw back immediately, seemingly without even needing to think about it, and it was kind of blowing Mike's mind. El rarely ever lied; she took the rules of their party really seriously and it had taken them long enough to shake her out of the habit of being brutally honest even when it might get her in trouble.

Sure, she knew that white lies sometimes were necessary, and she knew how to keep secrets if they could hurt someone or if they were in a life-or-death situation— which he guessed this probably was, for him particularly, given that Hopper owned a gun— but she'd never been one to lie flawlessly and effortlessly like this, like Nancy used to do all the time. It was a little scary to see, to be honest.

(It was also really hot, but again, *not* the right time to be thinking along those lines.)

She crossed her arms, frown deepening. "Seriously, what's with the third degree?" she asked defensively, and Mike wasn't sure that particular turn of phrase was a good idea given that Hopper was a cop, so giving people the third degree was kind of his default setting.

He was right. It wasn't a good idea, because then Hopper set his Schlitz can down on the table and stared straight at El, obviously annoyed now. "Third degree, huh?" he threw back, pushing himself up to a standing position and looking like the umpire who was about to cut the tennis match short (if such a thing was even possible; Mike didn't know the first thing about tennis, let's be real). He rubbed his eyes with one hand and sighed. "Alright. Okay, then— Wheeler, go home."

His tone made it absolutely clear that it was definitely not a request, and Mike swallowed hard when he realized that, yep, his first instinct had been right this time: Hopper knew, and they were done for.

Eleven knew in the back of her mind that she was being hypocritical, but her immediate reaction was indignation.

"What? Why!" she asked loudly, moving closer to Mike and holding on to his arm as if to pull him back were her father to throw him out abruptly. It was silly, because she knew Hopper would never do that, and even if he did she'd be able to stop him with her mind, but it was almost instinctive on her part.

Hopper glared at her and scoffed. "Because I wasn't born yesterday and his t-shirt is inside out!" he barked back at her, signaling sharply toward Mike with his hand even though he was looking directly at her.

El's gaze immediately snapped toward her boyfriend— Mike was also looking down, pulling at his traitorous white t-shirt with an appalled expression— and their wide eyes met at the realization that not only was his clothing indeed inside out, but *he also had put it on backward*. Mike had gone paler than she'd ever thought was possible, and Eleven herself was so embarrassed that she wished her superpower was teleportation instead of telekinesis. Either that, or the power to make the earth swallow her whole. That would be really useful right about then.

She turned back to her dad, who was still sneering at her, and a thousand and one excuses ran through her mind— curiously enough, in a voice that sounded a lot like Dustin— but before any of them could come out of her mouth, she decided they'd been caught anyway, so there really was no point to it now.

"Fine, so we made out a little," she admitted with a huff. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Mike cringe and close his eyes like he expected a bomb to suddenly go off, but she wasn't going to let the awkwardness get in the way of her righteous exasperation. Hands on her hips, she added: "Why is that so wrong?"

And it *wasn't*; she believed that more than anything. Joyce had talked to her about this ages ago, how when two people love each other, they can express their love in many different ways, and one of those ways is physical. And *that's okay* as long as both parties involved want it and agree to it. So El knew that the way she felt about Mike, the way Mike made her feel with his touch and his kisses, could never be *wrong*, and she wasn't going to let anyone say it was. Not even her father.

She felt half a second of relief when his retort started with "I never said it was." Unfortunately for her, that was followed by, "What's *wrong* is that you just lied straight to my face!" and almost immediately she felt the guilt start creeping up on her.

He must've seen it in her expression because he smirked, but it wasn't the fun, teasing kind of smirk; rather, it was a more angry-looking type of smirk that he didn't often direct her way. "Yeah, so much for 'friends don't lie,' huh?"

She had to look away because him using her number one rule against her made her stomach clench, and the way he was glaring at her made her feel like the worst daughter in the world. But then she remembered that all her friends, every other teenager she knew from school— none of them really went around telling their parents everything they did. Mike certainly didn't tell his mother every time they kissed. Dustin lied to his mother all the time and she still thought he was the best son ever. Even Will kept some things from Joyce, because he didn't want her to worry about him all the time.

So why was she getting a lecture for doing something every other teenager did on a daily basis? Wasn't that what Hopper always said he wanted, for her to be a normal kid? Who was the hypocrite now? "Oh, so you want me to tell you everything we do?" she shot back, feeling validated in her anger this time. "Should I start at second base, or—"

Her father cut her off with a loud groan. "*Jesus*, you little wiseass, that is *not* what I said—"

"El, really, it's okay," Mike intervened hurriedly for the first time, probably to impede the possibility of any private details being

bandied about as ammunition. She didn't plan on *actually* revealing the more intimate details of their makeout session, but it made for a good threat. Her boyfriend clearly didn't realize that, though.

He touched her arm lightly to let her know being asked to leave wasn't a big deal, and she turned to him, her eyes begging. He hesitated for a second, but then shook his head. "Seriously, I can just go home and I'll see you tomorrow—"

"No, you don't have to go, that's not *fair*," she argued vehemently at the same time as Hopper commented, "See? At least one of you can see sense here."

She spun on her heels and gave her father a glare that she was sure was more than worthy of the Hopper last name. "No! If he has to leave, then I'm going with him," she declared, determined to stand her ground on this.

To her surprise, however, her dad's reaction was more dismissive than antagonistic. "Fine, go right ahead, then," he said, picking up his can of Schlitz and taking it to his lips for a long gulp that looked to be the last one. "Not like I can stop you, anyway," he muttered under his breath, or at least that's what it sounded to El like he said, then walked past the two of them and toward the kitchen, probably to throw the can in the trash.

She stared at his retreating back in confusion. Seriously? First he gets mad about finding them in the house together, and now he's just fine with them going off God-knows-where all on their own? She didn't get what his deal was today, and it only made her more and more frustrated.

"Fine!" she retorted, hastily grabbing Mike's arm and pulling him toward the door, giving him barely enough time to get a hold of his light jacket from the hanger in the foyer before dragging him out and slamming the door closed behind them with her mind.

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She'd stomped all the way to the station wagon, clearly intending for them to drive off somewhere, but he managed to convince her to take a walk with him instead. The weather was pretty nice for early April, and he thought they all needed something of a cool-off period before they went back to her place. Because they had to eventually go back and face the music, even if Eleven was vehemently opposed.

"He kicked you out of the house!" she reminded him, still fuming, as they walked through the forest, joined hands swinging between them in wide arcs. "He can't do that! He's being completely unreasonable."

"Yeah, that... sucked," Mike admitted. He'd thought Hopper was okay with their relationship, that he trusted them— *him*— and understood that this wasn't just some teenage flight of fancy for them. It stung, it really did, for Hopper to treat him like some random horny dude just trying to get into his daughter's pants. He should know better by now.

That said, storming off in a rage and giving him the silent treatment for the next three weeks wasn't going to make Hopper any more charitable to their case, especially given that they were the ones who messed up in the first place. "You gotta admit it's also kind of our fault, though," he countered. "We *did* lie. And we shouldn't have started anything where anyone could walk in on us. I mean, what if we hadn't heard the door open? He could've caught us right in the act!"

She rolled her eyes and gave him a *look*. "We weren't going to have sex, Mike," she pointed out, one eyebrow arching high.

"No, I know that," he was quick to agree, although he had a feeling that once again, his tendency to blush when embarrassed was betraying him. "I'm not assuming that we were, or anything," he mumbled. Of course they hadn't set out to have sex when they started kissing that morning. Intellectually, he knew that.

That didn't mean that the dumb teenager part of his brain didn't wonder what it would be like, especially when they actually in the middle of things, when everything was so *good* and so *thrilling* and so

perfect that the entire world disappeared until it was just the two of them. That didn't mean the possibility wasn't looming over them every time they made out. That didn't mean sex didn't feel like the logical destination of their physical relationship.

Which was probably why Mike felt so guilty that they hadn't been more careful. "I'm just saying," he continued, "I've had the misfortune of walking in on Nancy while *she's* going at it—" More times than he could count, honestly. "—And *God* do I wish I could bleach my brain clean of that mental image. I can sort of understand why Hopper is paranoid about us. And don't you think we're playing with fire a little here?"

El frowned just slightly. "What do you mean?" she asked, letting go of his hand momentarily to hold onto his arm instead, which had the added benefit of bringing her closer to his side.

"I mean..." Mike sighed uncomfortably, trying to put his thoughts into words in a way that made sense, rather than babbling as he was wont to do. "I mean, lately every time we're together like that, it's like I just want... more, you know? Like I can't get enough of you." He wasn't entirely sure that he'd succeeded in explaining, but that's the best he had.

Then a thought occurred to him and he stopped abruptly in his steps. "It's— it's not just me, right?" he asked, somewhat scared of her answer. He thought she liked their makeout sessions just as much as he did, and she'd never really given him reason to think otherwise, but again, he didn't want to just assume...

She bit her lower lip and dodged his gaze for a moment, looking down at her shifting feet. He was worried for a second, but when she looked up again, there was something new in her brown eyes as they met his, an intensity that made his heart stutter. "I feel that way, too," she admitted, looking up at him between her lashes.

His lips slowly drew into a smile. "Yeah?" She nodded in response, smiling shyly up at him, and he couldn't keep himself from leaning down and kissing her softly. "That's good," he said when they pulled back, "but..."

He sighed, grabbing her hand and pulling her along as they continued their walk. "It's just— things get heated so fast that it's like... what if one day we get too caught up and just... can't stop?" he finally came to the crux of the issue. That's what really worried him, even more than Hopper's reaction today.

She shrugged. "Then we don't stop."

Mike nearly tripped over his own feet, so floored was he by the ease of her response. She didn't even seem to think about it for a second! He regained his balance quickly— although the stupefied expression in his face was going to remain a bit longer— and when he turned to look at her, just a heartbeat away from asking if she was sure, she continued speaking. "I mean... it's going to happen eventually, right?" She seemed taken aback by his surprise.

"Well, sure," he conceded, the term *logical destination* bouncing around in his mind again. "I just don't want it to be some quick thing where your dad might catch us," he added with a shrug of his own. "At least not the first time."

She was pensive for a moment, processing his words, but then the corners of her lips started quirking up. "Oh, so you're counting on it happening more than once?" she asked him teasingly, mischievous smile still in place.

He had to grin, too. He couldn't help it; her impish mood was contagious. "Yeah, I mean— A few... *thousand* times sound nice," he quipped back with a chuckle.

She laughed and shook her head affectionately at him, starting to walk again. "You don't even know if it'll be good," she contended, not waiting for his reaction as she was already a few paces ahead of him.

"Hey." He stretched out an arm to grab hold of her hand and tug her back to him before she could get too far. "If it's with you, I know it's going to be amazing," he assured her, and he knew *that* without even needing to think about it for a second.

She stepped directly in front of him and stood on her tiptoes to peck his lips. "Well, it's nice to know you want to," she commented as she

pulled back.

"Are you kidding me? It's basically all I can think about these days," he admitted, a little embarrassed but feeling like he needed to be honest about this. Her cheeks went a little red, and he took that as an encouraging sign.

He leaned forward so he could rest his forehead against hers. "El, I want you so much that sometimes I think I'm going to spontaneously combust if I don't make love to you soon..." he revealed earnestly. He had closed his eyes so he couldn't see her reaction to his words, but he felt when she reached a hand up to cup his face and caress his cheek with her thumb.

"I just don't want it to be an 'Oops, we just had sex' kinda thing," he continued, opening his eyes to find his gaze locked on hers. He pulled back just slightly so he could look at her more comfortably as he spoke. "I don't want it to happen because we were making out one day and everything felt so good that we just lost our heads, you know?"

He shrugged before bringing their joined hands up to his lips to kiss her knuckles. "I want it to happen because we both want it to happen," he asserted fervently. "I just... I don't want you to regret anything."

She squeezed his hand. "If it's with you, I could never regret it," she assured him, using his own turn of phrase from earlier in such a sincere way that it made his heart skip a beat once again.

He had to kiss her, he couldn't *not*— so he leaned down to capture her lips again, and this time it wasn't a quick, soft peck; it was a deep exploration of each other's mouths, an outpouring of passion accompanied by a poignant embrace, his arms around her waist drawing her as close as their material selves allowed, her hands behind his neck clinging onto him like a lifeline.

When they pulled back, they were both breathing hard, hearts beating loud enough to echo in the quiet of the forest. Not out of desire— although there was always a little of that lingering in the background lately, as this entire conversation could attest to— but

out of sheer emotion; the knowledge that they trusted each other so implicitly pumping the love through their veins.

"I feel the same way," he whispered, nuzzling his nose against hers softly. Then he remembered that he'd been trying to make a point. "Does that mean we *should*, though?" he asked, going back to the thread of their conversation. He wanted to make sure they were both on the same page after today, and the only way that would happen was by actually talking about this.

She looked at him curiously, cocking her head slightly to the side. "Doesn't it?" Her tone was light, like she meant the question to be rhetorical, but there was something in her expression that made him think that she genuinely was unsure what the answer was.

He took a step back, instinctively giving her some space. "I don't know, I just..." He sighed. "Let me put it this way," he decided to start again. "If I ask you to have sex with me today, if I ask you that right now that we've been walking and talking for the last fifteen minutes instead of in your room making out... what would you say?" he posited carefully. "What would be your immediate reaction?"

As she pondered the question, he saw her brows draw together in an expression he often saw when they were doing homework together and she was trying to work out a particularly complex math problem; it was an obvious sign that the answer to his question wasn't as clear-cut as she might've originally thought it was.

She opened and closed her mouth a few times before actually managing to say something. "I mean..." She paused and pursed her lips momentarily. "I don't..." She sighed, looking at him with something like dismay in her expression. "I'm sorry. I guess... it's still a little bit scary." She seemed hesitant to admit that.

He shook his head and his hands moved to cradle her elbows, holding her delicately in an attempt to show her that he understood. "I get it. That's okay." He smiled encouragingly. "It just means that we should probably wait until it's not scary anymore."

She smiled back, the gesture small but sincere. "Okay. That makes sense." She took hold of his arm, cuddling up to his side, and started

walking again, looking relaxed. As he walked alongside her, he hoped she truly understood that he didn't mind, that he'd wait as long as it took until it felt right for both of them.

They'd only moved ahead a few yards when she stopped in her tracks, looking up at him with a puzzled expression. "Wait... does that mean you think we shouldn't make out at all anymore until we're ready to have sex?"

"What? No," Mike blurted out immediately, absolutely aghast at the mere suggestion. There was no way they could manage that—a thought that was confirmed by the alarm bells ringing in the back of his mind, screaming at him that if he couldn't kiss her and touch her and be intimate with her in any way, *he was going to die*. "No no no," he shook his head emphatically. "That's not—I mean... there's lots of other stuff that we can do that isn't... *it*, right?"

She contemplated that for a heartbeat, but then that wicked little smile drew itself on her lips again. "Other stuff sounds good," she accepted with a chuckle, and *God*, he loved her so much.

"Other stuff is very good. Definitely," he agreed with a bright grin before swooping down to peck her lips again quickly. "We just... have to be more aware, I guess," he added, going back to their original problem. "Of where we are, and who might be around."

She nodded, then wrapped her arms around his waist, snuggling into his chest. "We should talk to my dad," she mumbled with a sigh as he returned her hug, though she still sounded a bit reluctant.

"Yeah," he agreed, resting his chin on the top of her head. Granted, it was going to be embarrassing as hell and he wasn't sure he was going to be able to look Hopper in the eye after that whole business with his t-shirt (clearly, he was the biggest spazz in the world and he should be lucky if Hopper didn't forbid him from dating his daughter simply because he was too stupid for her).

Still, he thought they needed to clear the air. He didn't want El's relationship with her dad to be strained because they'd screwed up this once, and he didn't want to have to dodge Hopper's glares every time he stood within two feet of his daughter. He'd thought they were

past that stage by now.

"Let's go back," he suggested, and they started making their way back to the Hopper house— perhaps walking a little slower than they should have, but hey, any time they got to spend together on their own was time worth stretching as far as they could.

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When they got back to her place, the others still hadn't arrived home — only Hopper's cruiser was parked beside the station wagon. The two made their way to the porch, where El took a deep breath, trying to prepare herself for what was coming, before finally walking into the house, Mike trailing carefully behind her, holding her hand.

She caught sight of her dad right away, sitting on the living room couch, feet up on the coffee table. Something that sounded like the news was playing on the TV, blaring out something about Michael Dukakis and some 60s pop star who had just become mayor somewhere in California. Hopper wasn't paying attention, though, as he had a pencil in hand and was working on solving today's crossword puzzle.

When he heard them come in he turned to look at them, eyebrows raised expectantly. El steeled herself and said, "Mike's staying for dinner." It wasn't a question, it wasn't a request— it was an affirmation. She heard Mike shuffle his feet behind her, but she didn't budge one inch. This was a non-negotiable issue for her.

Hopper looked them over for a few seconds longer before sighing. "Good," he stated, which was a response Eleven wasn't expecting. He brought his feet down, threw the folded-up newspaper and pencil down on the coffee table, and stood up with a groan.

"Sit," he told them in a tough tone, signaling to the couch he'd just vacated. It sounded like an order, but then again, so had her own words just a minute previous, so she figured she would not complain,

just this once. Compromise and all of that.

She walked to the couch pulling Mike behind her, and they both sat down, hands still entwined in a vice grip, looking up at her dad warily as they waited for him to say something. Hopper, who had moved to the opposite side of the coffee table to let them pass, stood there with his hands at his waist and looking everywhere but at them for a long while, as if putting his thoughts together. Judging by Mike's leg, which had been bouncing since the moment they sat down, and the churning in El's own stomach, all this stalling was doing was making them antsy.

Finally, he ran a hand over his face and turned to look at them seriously. "Okay," he started, "I'm just going to go ahead and ask: Are you having sex?"

"No!" they both blurted out in unison. The funny thing, though (or, well, it would be funny in any other circumstance), was that where she sounded angry or perhaps embarrassed, Mike sounded like she imagined a person would sound when facing a firing squad.

However their response came across, Hopper took it with clearly noticeable relief. "Good," he breathed out, punctuating the word with a quick nod. "Are you planning on having sex?"

Thinking of the conversation they'd just had while out in the forest, she turned to look at Mike, unsure of what to say. She found him looking back at her, equally uncertain. They needed to say *something*, but she didn't know if "when it's not scary anymore" counted as an actual plan. "As in... someday?" she asked tentatively.

Her dad must've noticed her confusion because he backtracked. "You know what? Let's shelve that one," he conceded, waving a hand in front of him dismissively. "All I want to know is that *if* you do have sex, you'll be safe about it."

The two teenagers didn't hesitate to nod at that. "Of course," Mike vocalized, clearly meaning to reiterate verbally that, yes, they were very aware of the importance of safe sex.

Perhaps their nods were a little too enthusiastic, because Hopper still

stared at them through narrowed eyes for a moment. "Mm-hmm." He didn't sound entirely convinced. He crossed his arms. "Well, just in case, I keep a box of condoms in the top drawer of my side table—"

"Eww, *Dad!*" the exclamation burst out of her mouth accompanied by a grossed-out grimace. She did *not* need to know what he and Joyce got up to when they were alone, even though common sense dictated that they were bound to have sex at least every once in a while. She just didn't need to have that confirmed, thank you very much. She was beginning to understand what Mike meant earlier about wanting to bleach his brain.

"Eh eh eh!" Hopper's voice cut her off before she could complain any further. "If you're mature enough to be thinking about it, then you should be mature enough to hear me talk about it." He pinned an authoritative glare on her before shifting it to Mike. "Top drawer. Side table. This is *for emergencies only* and if I suddenly run out, I will charge you for them," he added, pointing at the two of them with his index finger.

"Jesus..." Mike groaned with a cringe, sliding down on his seat as if wanting to disappear from view, bringing the hand that wasn't holding hers up to cover his face out of sheer embarrassment.

She bit her lip and gave his hand a squeeze, wishing she could say Hopper was just joking, but they both knew he wasn't. He would definitely count. That's what he did with his beer, though of course none of her friends were stupid enough to actually try and steal beer from the chief of police. (Except that one time with Dustin, but they didn't talk about that.)

"And, listen..." Her dad spoke up again, drawing her attention away from Mike. Hopper was looking at her now, his expression softer, apologetic. "You don't have to tell me about what you do when you're alone. I was your age once, I can take a guess," he admitted begrudgingly.

Once again, El did *not* want to think of her father ever being involved in that kind of activities, but she had heard enough stories from both him and Joyce of the time when *they* were both seventeen— stories that involved skipping class and smoking and shirking their

responsibilities, and usually ended with "...now that I'm an adult I realize that I was being a knucklehead and you shouldn't ever pull the kind of shit I pulled back then." It always made her laugh.

"We'll just call it private time, or whatever," Hopper continued in a mumble. "As long as you're not being stupid about it, I can pretend like I don't notice," he conceded, with a resigned shake of his head.

She felt Mike squeeze her hand and when she turned to look at him, he gave her a small smile, which she returned. Then she turned back to her father. "We're not stupid," she assured him sincerely, their motto coming out of her mouth with weighty significance.

He gazed at her for a minute, still with that softness in his eyes, but also a little bit of pride, and a little bit of sadness. He ran a hand through his hair. "Okay," he agreed. "Just don't... don't lie to me, alright? I used to lie to my parents all the time, and I'm starting to realize now that it *really* sucks." He shook his head. "I thought we were better than that."

She felt the same guilt from earlier start creeping up on her again. Yes, Hopper should respect her and Mike's privacy, and he absolutely should not have attempted to kick her boyfriend out— she was standing firm on that no matter what— but Mike was right: she shouldn't have lied to him.

She and Hopper had been through so much together through the years; they were a team. He was her protector, her mentor, her *family*, and she knew deep in her soul that even if he didn't always go about it the right way, he always, *always* wanted what was best for her. The least she could do was be honest with him. She thought she'd already learned that lesson, but sometimes she got so caught up in everything that she forgot.

She let go of Mike's hand for the first time since they came back from the forest, and stood up, walking over to where her dad was standing. "We *are* better than that," she said, tugging at the sleeve of his flannel shirt. She looked down at her feet. "I'm sorry... I shouldn't have lied," she added, remorseful. "I just... didn't want you to be mad, I guess."

She looked up, relieved, when he threw an arm around her shoulders

and drew her to his side. "I'm not mad," he assured her. "I get it. You two are..." He let go of a deep sigh. "You're in love, and it's not up to me to tell you what to do with your relationship."

He looked at Mike, who was still sitting on the couch, leaning forward against his knees and watching the two of them with an encouraging expression, and then back at El. "Listen, it's not that I'm giving you free reign to do... all of that," he started carefully, signaling in the direction of her bedroom with his chin. "But I know I can't stop you. Just... don't let me catch you at it, okay? I *really* don't need to see that," he finished with a huff.

El giggled, and he squeezed her shoulders a little tighter in return. "We won't. Thank you," she said, smiling up at him. She wanted to give him a proper hug, but it just occurred to her that she still wasn't wearing a bra, and she didn't want to bring things right back to awkward if he figured *that* out.

Thankfully he didn't notice her hesitation, instead declaring, "Well, that's that. Let's never do this again, please." She couldn't agree more.

Mike finally stood up from his seat. "I'm gonna go..." He looked down at himself. "...fix my t-shirt, I guess," he finished in a barely audible mutter. It made El laugh again and he mock-glared at her before going off to do just what he said.

Hopper let go of her with an amused chuckle of his own. "Joyce and Will are bringing dinner," he let her know, "but that won't be for a while, so..." He picked up the newspaper and his pencil from the coffee table. "You wanna help me with the crossword?" he suggested, waving the paper in front of her with a small grin.

She smiled. Crosswords used to be one of those things they liked to do together, back when she was still working on expanding her vocabulary. They would sit on the couch after breakfast on weekends and go through the puzzle, Hopper making sure El checked the dictionary for any word she didn't understand, and always ready to further explain if the dictionary definition wasn't clear enough. It was one of those daddy-daughter traditions they instituted even before they actually became father and daughter.

It sounded like fun, but she shook her head. "I can't. I have to keep looking for my catalogs," she let him know. He'd seen her browsing through the catalogs so he knew what she was talking about. "We're gonna have to go get Max's present tomorrow anyway," she admitted sheepishly now that it was more than obvious they hadn't left the house that day.

"Alright." He smiled and ruffled her hair like he used to when she was younger. "Go do that, then. I'll let you know when it's time for dinner."

She went back to her room, where her boyfriend was conveniently just taking his shirt off, and closed the door behind her. If her father noticed or was bothered by it, he didn't say a word.

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Notes: So, Hopper's now moved from *If-you're-going-to-be-alone-together-the-door-has-to-stay-open* territory to *Please-for-the-love-of-God-close-the-door-if-you're-going-to-be-alone-together* territory, and I am officially having waaaaaaay too much fun with all of this. xD

Shoutout to Debbie Kluge, who is never going to read this, but a long time ago she wrote one of my favorite fanfiction series of all time for *The Real Adventures of Jonny Quest* fandom. One of the stories in that series includes a conversation between two characters about whether or not they're ready to have sex, and it's such writing goals that it's stuck with me for over seventeen years. (Hi. I'm old.) This story was heavily inspired by that scene, so I tip my hat off to her.

The blue hoodie Eleven wears here is the one Mike wears through a large part of season 2. Admiral Ackbar is a minor character from the *Star Wars* saga, and the greatest meme pop culture has ever created. Michael Dukakis is a former governor of Massachusetts; in early April 1988 (when this story takes place) he won the Wisconsin Democratic presidential primary, and he would go on to become the Democratic party's presidential nominee for the 1988 election, which he eventually lost to George H.W. Bush. The 60s pop singer also

mentioned is Sonny Bono, of Sonny & Cher fame, who was elected mayor of Palm Springs on April 12th of that year.

Happy International Fanworks Day, everyone! :)